

Sword and Spinner: The Hand of Retribution

[FX: A small stringed instrument picks its way through notes.]

Abigail, as the intro: Sword and Spinner, Episode Two: Maps, Flowers, and Lila.

[FX: Cicadas fade in, interspersed, occasionally, by the faint sound of crows.]

Child snatchers and magic forests didn't turn into anything substantial, so Remus found a nervous town and bullied Lila into being discreet for two excruciating hours in the corner of a tavern. Lila sullenly sipped her soup, hood pulled low over her head, and moaned to Remus in between mouthfuls about wasted opportunities as two bards pranced around by the fire. They both winced as one of the bards went sharp, missing the right chord on their lute.

"The amount of *publicity* we're losing out on," she sighed. "I have more talent in the tip of my nose than the two of them put together."

"We're looking for a *job*."

"I would get us a job! I bet I could have, like, eight jobs lined up by the time the evening was --"

Lila stood, chair screeching, and made to pull her hood back. Remus yanked her back down. "There's no way I'm letting you do that."

"*Rude*."

“The only people you attract with your ridiculous songs are desperate people looking for idols. That’s not work.”

“I could do with a little idolization,” she huffed. “Good for the soul.”

“We’re waiting,” Remus insisted. “I’ve let the barman know. He’ll bring us a problem, if there are any to be had in this pit of a town.”

And sure enough, forty-five minutes later --

“There’s a monster at the edge of my farm,” said a man, rough around the edges and withered by age and the sun. He’d slid into the seat across from them, fists on the table. Remus took in the cuts that littered his knuckles, the edges of nasty-looking bite wounds visible on his forearm, tinged purple with bruising and red with an infection he hadn’t quite managed to cover with his sleeves.

Remus wasn’t an expert, but the teeth indentations almost looked -- *human*.

Something soured in the pit of their stomach.

The man caught his gaze and yanked his sleeve down lower. “It’s eating my pigs. Stealing crops. I tried to shoot it down -- blessed with a bit of talent with a crossbow -- but the bolt didn’t even seem to phase it. I need --”

“-- An expert,” Lila cut in, ravenous. “Well, luckily, you’ve come to the right place, my friend. I’m sure you’ve heard of us, the sword and spinner --”

“Remus, from the Far Shore,” the farmer interrupted, ignoring Lila’s outstretched hands. “Yes, I’ve heard of the foreign ranger who’s done more for the edges of this country than the kings ever have.”

They could practically hear Lila’s teeth grinding together. “And *whom* do you think told those legends?”

“Who,” Remus corrected, offhandedly. And then, to the farmer -- “You know, my country has a name.”

“As do *I* – Do you know who I am?”

“*Lila*,” Remus warned. She made an indignant sound and crossed her arms.

“Can you help me?” The man asked. Remus took a long look at the man’s shirtsleeves, gripped tight in his fists, and weighed the plea in their mind.

They threw a handful of coins down onto the table and readied themselves for a long night. “We can.”

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The moon was bright overhead by the time Remus, Lila, and the man arrived on the edges of town. There wasn’t long now until the Longest Night – it went dark so early it was hardly past morning, these days, when the sun began to set, which made time go strange in Remus’s head. Darkness didn’t mark a time to settle in. It blurred the already fragile lines in their head between work and sleep, work and meals, work and all else.

They followed the man down along the dirt road, Remus keeping one hand loose on their sword as they began to cut across one of the farmer’s pastures to his house. In the setting sun, Remus observed the cropping of small cottages – *cottages* being generous, as they were closer to *huts* – at the edge of one of the far fields, between where the woods picked back up and the farm proper.

“You own all of this?” Remus asked, turning to take in more of the property. At the very middle, fields laid out like spokes of a wheel surrounding it, was one of the biggest houses Remus had ever seen.

The man half-grinned. “Most of it.”

“And you plow it all yourself?” Lila asked. She, too, turned sharp eyes upon the great house. “Big family, then, I’m guessing, to help out.”

“It’s rent,” said the farmer. He nodded towards the cottages – huts – at the edges of the farm. “I own the land they live on. They do the farmwork.”

“Not very Rhysean of you,” Lila said, tone starting to go hard.

Remus reached out and set a hand, hard, on her shoulder. “*Lila.*”

“Unless I’m misunderstanding? Is this communal? Do you all share equally in the harvest reaped?”

“*Lila,*” Remus insisted.

“I’m *asking*,” she snapped. “Not condemning.” Her tone sounded very much like a condemnation.

“I didn’t call you here to critique the way I run a business,” the man growled. The last of the sun had disappeared, fast, and night shadows cut his face into hard lines. Remus noticed, for the first time, the slightest tinge of an accent to his voice – it was almost – Illiknan. “I asked you to kill the things stealing my crops. Will you do that?”

“That’s a no then, isn’t it?” Lila drawled.

“I kill monsters,” Remus said, monotoned. “If there are monsters around, they won’t live to see the sun rise.”

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The farmer insisted they sit for a meal before they began any work.

“They never come out ‘till it would be properly night in the warm days,” he said gruffly as he brought out mugs of coffee – Remus thought it tasted like eating potato dirt; Rhyseans loved it for reasons beyond him – and houseguest fare: stew thick with game and

cold season vegetables and hot buttered rolls. Lila stared lustfully at a jar of berry preserves that had been left on the table until the man caught on and brought a knife out for it, too. Remus had learned fast that it was rude to ask for more than you were given here – paradoxically, it was equally rude to deny guests of a house much of anything. It seemed Lila and the farmer were both far more in tune with how to manipulate this system to their advantage than him. As Lila spooned no small amount of jam onto her roll, the farmer grimaced but continued: “I don’t want you inefficient and that requires food. Eat.”

Remus toyed with their mug of coffee, trying not to let their lip curl, but the man said “-- And drink. Don’t want you falling asleep on the job.”

They understood guest culture here to know how rude it would be to refuse a direct order like that. Reluctantly, he lifted the mug to his mouth and swallowed, trying not to sputter – ghosts and gods and stars, how was it *worse* than normal? There was an odd residual taste to it that burned at the back of his throat, something sharply bitter that thickly coated his tongue. Lila watched, eyes twinkling. It took nearly every ounce of their self-control not to snarl at her.

“Here,” she said, and before anyone else could move, she scraped approximately half the jar of preserves into his cup and topped the rest off with more coffee. She dumped the knife in with a clatter. “Stir. It’ll taste better.”

Remus did not think she missed the very small whimper that escaped the farmer’s mouth. At Lila’s motioning, he stirred, lifted it to his lips, and grimaced a far bit less. Lila sat back, satisfied, and tore into another roll. Remus began to suspect that no matter how well this job went, they would not be asked back for another. Damned Lila.

In time, it reached the point that they all estimated as true-night — the time the sun finally gave out during the height of the warm days. Their employer, who'd sunk back into a thickly padded chair to wait out the in-between hours, finally pulled himself upward, put out the pipe he'd been using to send noxious fumes upward to cloud the ceiling for an excruciating amount of time — guest culture, Remus knew, did not look kindly on commenting on the habits of one's hosts, but, ghosts and gods and stars, they wanted to — perhaps this was retribution for the jam— and gestured out towards the door. "They should be beginning. And you both should be well ready."

So Remus pulled their spear from their bag — a distance weapon, good for throwing at whatever monster this was before it got too close — hefted themselves upward as well, and headed outside.

The night, in the time they'd hidden inside, had turned malevolent. There wasn't another word to describe it. Remus did not believe in Rhysean magic, not in the sputtering dying way that they still claimed it existed here (oh, what was that old story of *rex et poeta et soldat*? It hadn't been long ago, the defeat of them by these Rhysean kings, and yet these people still believed in the story that the poet had told) — but if every night was like this, he would not have been able to deny the magic.

It was sentient and grasping and cold. It raised the hairs on the back of his neck and it begged to let it swallow him whole. Ghosts and gods and stars, why were they suddenly afraid to leave this porch? The second they stepped out of the lamplight, Remus felt like he'd never be able to find his way back.

Beside him, Lila hissed. She was jittery — something she, like most other poets, most always were, but this was a new level of unsettled. It grated on Remus's nerves —

everything in their chest told them that whatever the threat was, it was just out of sight.

Lila's twitching was making it worse. "There's something wrong here," she said. "Do you feel it? Remus, do you feel it?"

Something flashed in all the wrong colors on the edge of his vision. *Monster.*

Creature. A warning turned over and over and over in their stomach.

"Yeah." He felt it. Ghosts and gods and stars.

"*Lurking in the dark,*" Lila sang. "*Something, something lurking in the dark. Don't stray far, child, don't stray far.*"

"Stop that," they snapped, and before they could second-guess themselves again, they stepped out into the night.

The creatures were everywhere and nowhere at once. Strange shapes — strange sounds — things, chattering, things, breathing down the back of his neck. Remus whirled around, not once not twice but too many times, convinced that the *something, something lurking in the dark* was behind him.

Eating pigs. Stealing crops. Where was the barn? Somehow they'd ended up in the middle of one of the fallow fields, a spoke of a wheel out from the big house. *There* — four spokes away. This one was gated in. There would be pigs, right? *Right.*

"Lila, we're in the wrong place," Remus muttered, but he stumbled over the words. They tried again but couldn't find them in Rhysean at all. "Pigs —" Remus said, in Illiknan, and Lila whirled in the dark, daggers out.

"Fuck," she said. "Fuck, *fuck.* I swore there was something there."

"We're in the wrong field," Remus insisted. "Let's go. Let's go."

The wind chittered. Something grabbed at Remus's feet — there, that same flicker of *thing* at the corner of their vision — but then, looking down, there was nothing, nothing.

That was when he caught sight of one of the creatures. It hunched and creaked, one spoke-one-field over, slinking through the corn. The stalks rustled, the sound amplified even from this far away, and the night whispered at his back. *There it is. There it is. There it is.* The thing turned, caught sight of the two of them — sword and spinner in a field — and its face — *warped*. Fangs grew and grew and grew from its head, horrifying and awful, *awful* in that old way that meant *to inspire fear*, and everything went quiet in their head.

There. There was the thing in the night. This, he knew how to do.

“Do you see it?” Remus asked, and before Lila could even respond, he took off at a run.

The creature didn't see Remus until he got close. It *grew*, somehow, stretching up taller and taller and taller, the thing raising its fists and letting out a garbled shriek. Remus didn't hesitate — not when the night was like this, egging him on — and knocked it to the ground, rolling with the impact and stumbling up to their feet. They kicked it, settling a boot onto its chest, and pulled his sword from its sheath.

Remus snarled, driving his sword up and just beginning to arc it down as the thing beneath his boot squeaked and writhed. It was wreathed in green – no, was that purple? Gold? It had three heads – three chests – it was growing again, fangs and teeth and claws as it cried out —

Remus blinked, blinked again, hard. His eyesight focused and slipped and resolved again – the thing's face blurred, blurred, blurred –

They forced their sword arm to a stop inches from the – from the *person's* face. In the seconds before they began to twist again, whatever was in Remus's system clouding their gaze, the person's face resolved into something gaunt, and ragged, and *hungry*. Something awful turned over in Remus's stomach.

This was –

This was –

They turned and vomited.

And suddenly, through the nausea through the bile through the psychedelic colors clouding his vision, turning the dirt monstrous too, Remus pulled enough threads together to make something make sense. He knew what this was. Of *course* this was what this was. Had he not been in these same shoes? Had he not been caught on the other side of this?

This was not *monsters*. This was not *creatures*. This was — greed, and naivety, even after all this time, and Remus, and unwittingly hired out as mercenary control.

How absolutely fucking *stupid* they'd been. He'd been played for a fool.

They dropped their sword to the ground with a dull thump. Through screaming vision, even as whatever was in his system tried to trick his brain into telling him this *person* before them was here to kill him, he extended a hand to the girl on the ground. Her teeth grew and elongated and shrunk and turned her face inside out, but Remus did not flinch.

He'd been drugged. That much was obvious. Was it the smoke, or the food, or the —

The coffee. Strong enough to mask the taste, and what had the farmer — the *landlord* insisted? Even after Remus had tried to push it away? *Drink. Drink, gladius.*

Why would the farmer need to drug them? Why would that be even *remotely* necessary, unless — ?

He was a fool. He was such a *fucking* fool. This is what came of playing a hero. You assumed the people that found you were valiant, too. This was how good people died.

“I’m so sorry,” they said. “You deserved better than this. Go home. I’ll sort this out.”

And he turned, trying to steady his breath trying to steady his vision, and went to find the landlord.

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“You lied,” Remus growled. He’d burst through the door and vomited, again, this time onto the man’s floors, but kept his resolve. They spat the last of the bile from their mouth and rounded on the man. “You said there was a monster. Out there — that not a monster. That is a girl, and she is hungry. Those are children, and they are hungry. This is not an attack. This is selfishness.”

“It’s *mine*,” the farmer snarled, and he was *changed*, in that moment. Remus thought, *here is the monster foretold. Found you.* “It’s *mine*. I own the land. I own the animals. They don’t deserve the eggs or the fruit or the grain. If they are too stupid to buy themselves what it takes to keep them well fed, they deserve to go hungry.”

“How’d you get the bite marks?” Lila asked, an edge coming into her voice that told Remus she already had a guess. Her grin was wide and shallow – more a warning of violence than true amusement. *Mercurial*. “Human. Or, at least – they look human. Did you catch one of them before you called us? Pin them to the ground? One of the little ones? Those look like children’s teeth. How despicable do you have to be where the only way a child can escape is by *biting* you?”

“I brought you here to take care of the things that were *destroying my harvest*. So *destroy, gladius*.”

Things. He’d called his neighbors *things*. Why didn’t these blasted people realize that the only way to survive was to survive *together*? Maybe most of them did. Maybe that’s why Lila had been so upset.

Maybe this was unique to Lila. Maybe this was the first time she’d seen cruelty of this kind.

But Remus was from across the sea. He’d been a child once – skinny and underfed, working on a landlord’s plot not unlike this. He’d *heard* of mercenaries like this, come to quell the tenants when they got too hungry and desperate. There was a fine line between *exploitation* and *extermination*, Remus had long ago learned, and when those with power strayed too close towards the latter, there was only one way to stop the cycle from continuing and the whole country turning to rot.

“You brought me here to kill a monster,” Remus said darkly. He flexed his fingers around the grip of his sword and glanced towards where the sky in the distance was just starting to threaten the faintest gray-blue of morning. “And I told you that if there were any to be found, they wouldn’t live to the dawn. There is only one monster that I can see.”

Remus swung his sword at the farmer’s neck.

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Lila found the rest of the families once the sun came up. They gathered around the farmer’s body – Remus staring across a corpse at a crescent moon of people, a little too dirty and a little too thin. Lila was among them, crouched beside the little girl he’d nearly gutted – sometimes he forgot that she wasn’t as loud and uncaring as she liked to pretend.

Most of the time – unless it was a moment like this, when she wasn't performing for the very air around her lest it call her *vulnerable* – he forgot that she was a bard and that meant she remembered well what it meant to be a child, too, small and afraid and trapped with your fate in the hands of someone else.

He blinked, hard, and tried to focus. The hallucinogens the farmer had given him had mostly worn off in his system, leaving behind like he was on the edge of throwing up and fluttering his eyes like Lila did to flirt in a stupid attempt to clear the fracturing in his vision – but. There was work to do.

Remus did not feel any shame as he picked up the head of the farmer. After all — so long as the body was buried, the ghost of this man could not come for him. Would he even have a ghost? The landlord had said things – *done* things – that made him almost feel... Illiknan. But he was Rhysean enough to have had property here – a home, a life. Even if it was a wretched and leeching one. He tried to do the math in his head – the approximate age of the farmer, the distance between the Necessary War and now – most importantly, could this man even have a ghost, dead in Rhysean soil? Could this man rise up and haunt Remus for killing him?

No. There was an illiknan word for *just murder*. Even though in the islands beyond Illikna the two words – *just* and *murder* – couldn't ever be reconciled, Illikna was a harder land. It knew better. If the weight of the crime and the guilt built up over a lifetime was more than the weight of the soul, it couldn't leave the body. No ghosts, so long as it was put to rest.

"Make sure to bury it," Remus said simply. "I know your qualms about reincarnation and magic and energies, or whatever. Don't burn it anyways. Bury the body. It's all I ask." He

paused. “That – and an oath. That the resources here will be shared or evenly divided. It’s not *rent*, what he was doing. It was *internment*.”

One person – strong jaw, thick eyebrows, hands poised with the utmost caution within a lover’s hand and on the top of a child’s head – looked to the rest of the group. “We don’t need to take a vow,” they said. “It’s the old way. Most of us –” – this was pointed at Remus, as if they recognized the slight tones in Remus’s that matched the landlord’s – “Don’t need to be reminded to share.”

Ah – Rhysean pride after all of this. Stupid, stupid.

He grinned, but it wasn’t *kind* so much as the same sort of *mercurial* that had made Lila look so close to dangerous earlier. “Isn’t it lucky that you had me, then. So that I could clear the path back to such ways for you?”

An unpleasant murmur swept through the crowd. Lila took that as her cue to stand, brushing off her pant legs and announcing, “This is *gladicus* Remus-Come-To-Rhysea. He’s not known for his niceties – but they mean well. Let him be.” Her chest hitched – Remus cursed, internally, already hearing the ways she would launch into a drawn-out speech of *and I tell his tales and, oh, also, we still do need to be paid*, but instead – her eyes focused on the person who’d confronted Remus, their protective hands on son and lover. Lila pursed her lips. “Remus has done much for this country, their own origins aside. If there is no need to ask for equality – just let us spend the night before we go.”

They marveled before their bard for just a second – Lila raised her eyebrows, lips parted and tongue poking through her teeth, daring him to comment. Remus acquiesced, not pushing the people away by speaking.

The person extended a hand towards Lila – she did not hesitate in shaking it. “That suits us well. Good practice, not to send good people out into the dark. All of us to the big house,” they said. “And we will face whatever this new life is once we’re all fed.”

Lila smiled and bowed, just slightly, taking their hand in both hers and pressing her forehead against it. “Thank you,” she said. “*Gratinoc*. Just – a word of advice. Don’t drink the coffee.”

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[FX: An acapella song begins to play as the cicadas fade out: It’s “The Hand of Retribution,” by Chloe Peterson]

The Hand of Retribution

And so we found ourselves once again

Seeking work from a man seeking revenge

A monster plagued his fields, the land he owned

A greedy, grasping beast ready to be dethroned

So he took us in, took us in to his place

A dragon’s den encircled by extorted workers

He fed us: coffee, stew as for the night we braced

And in our fervor we ignored the rotten taste

As we crept into the moonlight

Fear filled up our lungs as eyes we sensed
Something, something lurking in the dark
Don't stray too far child, but we strayed far

Further into the fields
Then we spotted the monster, fangs warped in glory
Reality tripped and spun and reeled
As the sword fought for his life and then he froze
As we realized in horror, we lacked the full story (story, story)
And a new tale composed

So back to the dragon's den
To kill the beast who blighted the land
We'd been played like a pawn
So we ensured that the monster didn't reach the dawn

And this, dear heart is the key
If serve only yourself and not the common need
Don't be surprised if you wind up dead
For the hand of retribution aims for the head
The hand of retribution aims for the head

[The outro, an instrumental version of Sword and Spinner, begins to play]

Abigail: Sword and Spinner is written and edited by me, Abigail Eliza.

Chloe: The music was written, sung, and edited by me, Chloe Peterson.

Abigail: The voice of Remus was Abigail Eliza.

Chloe: And the voice of Lila was Chloe Peterson.

Abigail: If you'd like to hear more about Sword and Spinner or other stories in Rhysea, you can check us out on twitter, instagram, or tumblr @Backagainpodcast or @Abigailelizawrites on Tik Tok.

Chloe: If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are.

Abigail: There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. I hope you have a wonderful day.